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ABSTRACT

An English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Intensive Program was established at Hostos Community College, New York, to help accelerate students' acquisition of ESL by combining three semesters of the college's regular ESL program into two semesters. Each level of this program provides 15 hours of classroom instruction per week, a 6-hour reading and conversation course, a 6-hour writing course, and a 3-hour language workshop. Each course seeks to develop all language skills in an integrated fashion using a content-based communicative approach. Students also take computer applications, theater production, arts and civilization or humanities, and math courses. ESL class size is limited to 20 students. Students are expected to keep a weekly journal in response to "New York Times" articles, participate in field trips, view films related to their ESL classes, read and respond to essays, do collaborative group and individual research projects, and submit a portfolio at the end of each semester. Overall, this program facilitates language acquisition through reading, writing, and discussion in response to provocative questions, collaborative learning tasks, the building of academic terminology, the development of critical thinking, and students' sense of empowerment. (SM)

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An Overview of the ESL Intensive Program at Hostos Community College

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Making Content Accessible to Promote Second Language Acquisition: The ESL Intensive Program at Hostos Community College (CUNY)

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An Overview of the ESL Intensive Program at Hostos Community College

The ESL Intensive Program was first established at Hostos Community College in 1982 as a way to accelerate students' progress in their acquisition of English as a second language by combining three semesters of the College's regular ESL Program into two semesters. Each level of the ESL Intensive Program provides fifteen hours of classroom instruction per week: a six-hour reading and conversation course, a six-hour writing course, and a three-hour language workshop. While each course has a specific focus in terms of content and skills development, each course seeks to develop all language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) in an integrated fashion using a content-based communicative approach. In the Program's first level students also take a three-credit course in Computer Applications and a three-credit course in Theater Production, while second-level students take a three-credit course in Arts and Civilization or Introduction to Humanities and an appropriate-level math course.

Class size is usually limited to twenty students in the ESL classes. To participate in the Program, students must be recommended by their ESL teacher, earn a final grade of at least a "B" in their ESL course, and perform satisfactorily on a writing/usage exam. Students in the Program are expected to keep a weekly journal in response to articles in **The New York Times**, which they receive by special subscription (twice a week in the first level and every weekday in the second level), to participate in field trips and attend films at the College directly related to the content of their ESL classes, do collaborative group projects and individual research projects, and submit at the end of each semester an

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extensive portfolio of written work done during the semester, including multiple drafts of at least eight assignments.

Creating a Content-Based Curriculum

Since the Program's inception, its students have graduated at an overall rate of more than 50%, approximately five times higher than students enrolled in the College's regular ESL Program. Despite its consistent success over a considerable period of time, faculty in the Program engaged in a major revamping of the ESL curricula in 1995 to incorporate a more content-rich approach to language instruction as a way to better prepare ESL students for future academic course work and for various proficiency exams mandated by the City University of New York (CUNY). The importance of this faculty initiative has been supported by theory and research in the field (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; Kasper, 1996, 1997; Pally, 1997; Wesche, 1993).

The Program's faculty opted to create a mini-core curriculum approach to language teaching and learning. Each ESL course focuses on several broad themes that draw on content from different academic disciplines such as the natural sciences, religion and philosophy, literature, history, psychology and sociology. For example, the curriculum of the Program's second-level reading and conversation ESL course deals with philosophies of education and concepts of freedom from philosophical and historical perspectives while the same level's writing course examines human origins from scientific, mythological and religious points of view, explores concepts of illusion and reality from psychological, literary and philosophical viewpoints, and explores notions of good and evil from multi-disciplinary perspectives as well.

Using Collaborative-Learning Tasks and Questions to Explore and Guide Content

Throughout the Program, ESL faculty require students to work collaboratively to make meaning of the course content and to formulate their own responses and interpretations. This collaborative-learning approach has numerous potential benefits. It affords students more opportunity to use the target language; it permits students to address their own doubts and concerns and to negotiate meaning; it allows students to generate and test their own hypotheses; it provides a natural way for students to practice and acquire the discourse of different academic disciplines; it requires students to assume greater responsibility for their own learning; it helps students to acknowledge and tolerate differing points of view; it gives students the opportunity to take on different roles and to employ a variety of discourse functions; it fulfills a basic human need for community and self-determination, which in turn results in students' gaining a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment.

In working collaboratively, consensus does not mean uniformity of thought but rather the collective judgment of a group as a result of a process of intellectual negotiation in which group members have advanced and defended their own ideas. As Harvey Wiener (1986) has written, "The group effort to achieve consensus by their own authority is the major factor that distinguishes collaborative learning from mere work in groups." Thus, collaborative tasks are carefully chosen to allow groups of students to produce something that each member could not have produced alone. The tasks also do not have a pre-conceived answer, outcome or solution so that students must establish a common set of assumptions and procedures in order to complete the task successfully.

Most of the collaborative tasks given to students require them to achieve consensus on challenging and complex questions which guide each unit of study and afford students the opportunity to grapple with timeless issues that humanity has explored since the beginning of conscious thought, questions such as "Where do we come from?," "What can we know?," "Why do we suffer?," "When are we free?" The presentation of the content is structured through these questions which serve as the cornerstone of the courses, and writing in response to these questions for a variety of purposes and audiences is the primary activity and is utilized as the pivotal strategy for the learning of content.

Students first explore the questions through informal written responses where they write short answers, one or two paragraphs, in response to the questions. This is formative and low-stakes writing where students themselves are the audience as they interact with ideas, concepts and vocabulary. These writing-to-learn activities are the springboard to what will ultimately result in the understanding of content (Young & Fulwiler, 1986).

Making Content Accessible: Three Sample Units

In the unit on Origins, for example, students explore the questions: "Who am I? Where do I come from?" The unit might begin with a brief, in-class written response to those questions which usually elicit statements like: "My name is Maria Fuentes. I come from Puerto Rico." From there, the class proceeds to explore deeper aspects of our origins which include background information about religion and science and how they each have differing explanations about who we are and where we come from. The first readings assigned are the first three chapters of Genesis, which contain the Judeo-

Christian explanation of our origins. Groups are then assigned for the semester and students begin their first collaborative task: to summarize the Genesis creation story and discuss how they believe in it, as literal truth or myth. This initial collaboration allows students to talk and write freely about already existing religious beliefs which are later going to be challenged by scientific explanations of our origins. The study of this initial work thus sets the pattern for the entire semester where all individual papers are preceded by collaborative tasks on the same topic which help students make meaning, develop fluency, and write clearly and critically.

At this point in the unit, the theory of evolution and the theory of the Big Bang are introduced through **The Mysteries of Mankind** (a film by **National Geographic**), **Cosmic Voyage** (a film by the American Museum of Natural History), visits to the American Museum of Natural History, the Rose Center for Earth and Space, and class readings and discussions. Groups must then collaborate on analyzing and discussing all that they have learned about evolution and the Big Bang from the films, museum visits and class. All group assignments related to these two theories require looking at content from many perspectives and all collaborative tasks demand that this content be analyzed and discussed for clarity and scientific accuracy.

Once both group papers are completed, a third major project is assigned where each group must describe the scientific explanation of the beginning of the world and the ascent of man as if it were a story told to a twelve-year-old child. This project, though creative in purpose, still makes huge demands in terms of accuracy and scientific clarity because of the content involved. Finally, the unit on Origins ends with an individual essay where students are asked to analyze how science explains the beginning of the

universe and human beings and how both scientific theories have influenced their religious beliefs.

In a unit on Education, students are asked to consider such questions as "What does it mean to become educated?," "What role do school and experience play in the process of education?," "What should the role of a university be in the educational process?" To explore these questions, students begin by reading two narrative essays in which the authors reflect on how events and relationships in their childhood influenced the eventual course of their lives. Students compare and contrast the nature of these relationships and experiences as well as the stylistic elements of the writers' technique. Students then write their own narratives about experiences and/or people that have helped shape their lives.

Students also see the film **Educating Rita** in which a young woman decides to return to school after a long absence to "discover" herself only to find that she is woefully under-prepared. Prior to seeing the film students have to find out about important writers such as Chekhov, Ibsen, Yeats, Blake, Forster and Shakespeare whose work will be mentioned in the film. Knowing something about these writers highlights the importance of having background knowledge, a theme that soon becomes a leitmotif for the entire semester. Students identify strongly with the film since it shows the many obstacles one has to overcome and the sacrifices one has to make to reach one's goals. After discussion of the film students write a review of the film or an essay in which they compare themselves with the film's main character, Rita.

The unit then moves from a personal perspective to a more philosophical one.

The class reads challenging essays by four prominent educators, Mortimer Adler, John Holt, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and Howard Gardner. Students use teacher-prepared questions that focus on key points and ideas, the answers to which are used to write individual or group summaries and responses for each essay. As the class reads each new essay, the writer's ideas are always compared to those of other educators, permitting students to reexamine ideas in relationship to one another.

The unit also includes two substantial collaborative group projects. In the first, groups prepare a chart on the educational philosophies of the four educators in which they present each educator's views on the following topics: the purpose of education, the ideal role of teachers in the learning process, the ideal role of students in that process; the relationship between skills and knowledge, and criticism of the educational system. Students also have to identify what they believe are the strengths and weaknesses of these philosophies to compare and contrast what they perceive as the most important similarities and differences among them.

In the second major project, groups see two films about education, **Dead Poets Society** and **Stand and Deliver**, and compare and contrast the students, teachers, and schools depicted in the films. Then, using their understanding of the four educators whom they have already studied, students are asked to speculate which teacher in the films each educator would prefer and to give reasons for their choice.

The unit on Education culminates in a four to five-page essay in which students write their own philosophy of education. Invariably students are amazed at how much they have learned about the subject in such a short time; the challenge for them is no

longer struggling to say something about a topic but rather deciding what ideas to include, what to omit, and how best to organize all the knowledge they have acquired.

The unit on Good and Evil is propelled by questions such as "Should one continue to believe in a Supreme Being despite the existence of evil and suffering? Why? Why not?," and "Why do human beings perform altruistic acts instead of behaving selfishly in order to avoid suffering at any cost?" The questions are posed after texts and/or films are analyzed and discussed in class.

The concept of the scapegoat and individual and societal responsibility for suffering is introduced through Ursula LeGuin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." This is followed by Desmond Morris's essay on "Altruistic Behavior" in which he claims that such behavior is the result of the slow adaptation of "genetic" tribal behavior to densely populated but anonymous urban living. The conversations often link up to the previously explored Darwinian concepts of "natural selection," survival, evolution and extinction as primary human motives.

Schindler's List, the film by Steven Spielberg, is shown and is followed by "The People's Holocaust," an essay by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, author of **Hitler's Willing Executioners,** in order to illustrate "the banality of evil" of the Holocaust, individual responsibility, and complicity in the face of society's cruelty and evil.

Finally, some of the original questions become the focus for formal writing assignments, with the final and culminating question for the unit being "Are human beings fundamentally, genetically, essentially and primarily good or evil? Defend your position." These assignments are often begun in class and drafted and redrafted at home, the final draft being a formal word-processed assignment.

Conclusion

Language acquisition in the ESL Intensive Program at Hostos Community College is facilitated through reading, writing and discussion in response to provocative questions, collaborative-learning tasks, the building of academic terminology, the development of critical thinking, and students' sense of empowerment, all which emerge organically from the exploration of content. This approach often confounds students' expectations. Most students come to the classroom expecting to receive a never-ending series of lessons focusing on discrete language skills with a corresponding infusion of grammatical rules. Yet as the semester unfolds, students begin to understand the role of content in their language-learning process and come to recognize that language, critical thinking and content are inextricably bound. One student in his introduction to his writing portfolio summed up the experience this way:

> I had never attended college in the United States before. On the first day when I came to Hostos, I found a lot of things different from what I expected. For example, I used to think that we would only learn reading, writing and practicing grammar in this Intensive Program … I have learned not only grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing, but also knowledge about education, freedom, history, human origins, good and evil, suffering, illusion and reality, as well as love. All these (sic) knowledge will enable me to understand the essential problems in the world and benefit my future study.

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